

tial to research what is most acceptable and common for a given genre. Students should be encouraged to note what is not present as well as what is.

3. **Be consistent.** Punctuation and graphic features operate as parts of systems. For example, the choice of a period over a semi-colon must always indicate a complete break as opposed to a linked break. Similarly, if a first-level header is bolded and a second-level header is italicized, then this must be true for every case of each. Once the option has been chosen, stick to it.

These principles will not fix the student's essay on pages 117–18, but they will provide a framework for discussing the essay, for moving from why it needs improvement to how to figure out what to do.



## Strategic One on One

When Ming came to you and handed you her paper, your biggest concern was probably, “What can I say or do in 15, 20, or even 30 minutes that will help her with this paper?” The overall goal of this book has been to introduce a body of knowledge about second language writers, their writing, and their readers that will help you come up with the particular answers that you need for working with Ming and students like her. Thus, we have seen how it helps to understand Ming as a person and as a language learner influenced by her previous schooling and her social circumstances. We have seen that before we can work on a paper, we must understand what the paper is expected to accomplish, both from the standpoint of the teacher who assigned it and the readers for whom it is intended. We also have to understand how language coalesces into written text and then the varying conventions for presenting that text. Beyond the particular answers, however, we also need strategies for presenting them to Ming. We need to realize that our opportunity to work with Ming is in fact a unique educational setting—a one-on-one interaction—and that teaching and learning in this setting is different from what happens in classrooms and through textbooks.

In contrast to these more predictable educational settings, one-on-one interactions are not scripted. We enter them without a set of learning objectives articulated with course goals or even a lesson plan for how to structure the interaction. Students also are likely to see them from a very utilitarian perspective; they simply want to improve their papers so that they can get a better grade on them. They do not see the interaction in the context of an overall course or as an opportunity to improve their literacy skills. Because of this, neither they nor we generally consider our

strategies for maximizing the effectiveness of one-on-one interactions and for using them to influence more than just an immediate paper. But we should think of them as more than a chance to fix something. As a way of concluding our search for answers to give Ming, Chapter 8 introduces seven strategies for using one-on-one interactions to promote sustainable learning and make our 15 minutes matter in the long-term.

## 1. Identify the priorities, and let the rest slide.

Many of us are perfectionists when it comes to writing. We cannot see a missing comma or a misspelled word or a popular saying that is not quite right. We fret when students use in-text citations only for direct quotations or when they explain in detail a concept that we think a six-year-old would know. And we feel like we are doing a disservice to students if we do not mention these things. As has been noted several times, however, if we address every issue in a paper we risk overwhelming students.

They may react by changing only the surface errors because those are easiest; they may also feel that all is hopeless and change nothing.

The advice instead has been to prioritize, **to decide in the context of this assignment with this learner**, what will have the greatest impact on the paper's effectiveness. Not only will this approach have a better chance of suggesting to learners steps that they can actually implement, it also teaches them about a good writing process. It shows that revision is a multi-stage process, that we should work on the

### Tutoring / Teaching Tip

The priority list will be different for each writer and each piece of writing. In general, however, start with issues related to the purpose of the writing and the student's understanding of his or her audience. These issues motivate discussions about organization and flow. Next, look for issues that make it difficult to understand meaning at a particular point in the text. Finally, work on issues that may annoy you or affect your overall impressions but that do not prevent you from understanding the student's intentions.

clarity of our position and the strategies for supporting and developing it first and then examine issues of syntax and punctuation. If time permits, you may want to suggest that once they address the priority issues, they should come back so that you can discuss other issues. If time does not permit, you may want to at least make sure they understand that you have tried to indicate priority issues, not all issues. In short, make it explicit that the help you are providing should be part of an on-going process.

## 2. Ask students to verbalize what they are trying to do and what they hear you saying.

When you work in a second language, you learn to live with ambiguity. There will always be a certain percentage of words you hear but do not know what they mean or have only a general understanding of. You tend to focus on the gist of what is being said instead, knowing that the discussion is about a particular topic or designed to promote a particular outcome. In many cases, that is sufficient. Thus a learner may hear what you say and realize that it is a suggestion to delete. They will delete the passage and consequently improve the paper, but they may not have understood why.

Understanding why depends on their ability to talk about writing, to discuss the text in an abstract sense as a series of moves by an author trying to engage a reader. The language of these discussions is typically very abstract and often somewhat imprecise. We refer to units of discourse with unclear boundaries, asking questions like, *Why should I believe this?* or *What gets your reader's attention here?* We talk about logical relations, inferences, and implications as if they were explicitly stated in the text. And we frequently refer to the fuzzy world of affective reactions. These are the tools of the writing conference, and they cannot be avoided, but they must also be learned and practiced.

It is a useful exercise to record ourselves talking with students one on one. Often we will discover in retrospect that we thought



we were having a balanced and interactive conversation when in fact we were expounding and students were simply signaling that they understood. Their contribution was to say *yes* or *um-hmm* and then occasionally to ask a one-word question like *why?* or *how?* If this is our conversation, then we have practiced the abstract language for talking about writing, and our students have been passive listeners focusing on the gist. As part of conferencing, therefore, we need to ask students both to verbalize their strategies and abstract motivations with respect to the text and also to repeat back to us what they hear us saying. By practicing the meta-language for writing, students develop their ability to seek and understand input and, more important, to think about writing without ambiguity.

### 3. Model the reader.

When we talk about writing, we are talking as a teacher. We are trying to develop students' expertise in the content knowledge of composition and rhetorical studies. But one-on-one interactions should do more than build expertise; they should also develop students' ability to practice their expertise, to craft effective messages. Thus, students need to learn not only how to talk about crafting but also how to gauge their product's effectiveness.

In order for a message to be effective, it must achieve a desired result with an audience. In a conversation the audience is in front of us, we can sense when they are bored or puzzled or excited by simply looking at their face. Writers do not have this luxury, and developing writers (both first and second language) typically have a hard time thinking about how readers will react to their writing. They assume omniscient knowledge of referents, causes, and goals. They think through a process before they write, and then commit to paper only the beginning and end. They state something that for them has an obvious implication and proceed as if the implication has been explicitly stated. If they are a second language writer, they may simply not know what their audience will or will not know.

Thus in addition to helping students learn to verbalize what is happening in a text, one-on-one interactions can also help them to visualize what will happen when the text is actually read. We can preface our comments with qualifiers like, "As I'm reading this, I'm thinking . . ." or "When I read this word, it reminds me of . . ." We may also want to sequence the conference according to the way that a first-time reader is likely to approach the text. In doing this, remember that not all texts are processed from beginning to end. Readers of some types of technical documents in particular are likely to read the introduction, and then jump to the conclusions before deciding if they want to find out about the exact methods and procedures. We may also want to talk about the impressions we bring to a text that are based on past experiences. For example, we can make comments like, "When I read research reports, I often check the bibliography first." One-on-one conferences provide an excellent way to model the one-on-one conversations that happen between a writer and a reader via a text.

### 4. Talk about texts as sites of strategic interaction.

One of the difficulties that students face when envisioning readers is that they often do not think of their writing as something that has a functional purpose or goal. Inside academia we write because we are told to; outside academia we write because we want to satisfy a need or achieve a goal. If the stakes for a report or a proposal are high, then we think a lot about what will really convince our audience, how much information they need as background, and where to slip in the explanation for why our costs are higher than a competitor's. Student writers, on the other hand, often think more in terms of the content that needs to go in the paper. They focus on how many sources or reasons they should include, whether they can make a specific claim, and what is left to say in the conclusion.

If students are asking these questions, it is in part because they do not have an independent way of evaluating the answers. The number of sources for them depends solely on how many the

instructor wants. Whether they can make a claim depends on whether the instructor says it is acceptable to include their opinion. The students are correct that in academic writing, the instructor's opinion is all that really matters. Thinking about the instructor's response as totally arbitrary, however, is not helpful. In one-on-one conferences, we can direct students toward a more productive understanding of the motivating forces behind a text, if we prompt them to think strategically. Their goal should be to impress their instructor, not satisfy his or her whims. If we can therefore help them to see their texts as a series of strategic moves, which function both to set up subsequent moves and to bring in qualities that are likely to impress, we give them a scale on which to judge their own writing and prepare them for their future writing outside of the academy.

### 5. Build analysis skills.

Part of impressing instructors is realizing why instructors assign writing in the first place. If the assignment is for a writing course, then the goal is usually practice in the crafting of an effective form. If it is for a non-composition course, then the instructor may also seek evidence of research abilities and awareness of disciplinary norms and practices. Across the board, however, instructors tend to see writing as an exercise that promotes thinking skills. Writing requires the invention of arguments, the marking of logical connections, and the ability to group and sequence. It is important to realize, however, that we believe it is possible to create better or worse arguments, clear or unclear connections, and groups that make sense and groups that do not make sense. In other words, thinking skills are something that we develop over time and through practice, which leads us back to the goal for assigning writing in the first place.

One-on-one interactions because of their individualized nature provide an excellent opportunity to help students improve their thinking skills. We can challenge students with counter-examples to their arguments, point out non-sequiturs, push them to extend their justifications, and identify other instances where a claim

applies. We can ask them to draw visual representations of a text's organization or compare their text with another. Finally we can model these skills by taking an undeveloped idea and discussing hypothetical ways it might be developed more. To the extent that we can help students see writing as a way of creating new ideas and knowledge, we are helping them to achieve the broader goals of higher education.

### 6. Focus on the lesson in the particular.

When we interact around a particular paper, we feel that we are teaching something that truly matters, something that we know will be useful to the student. In focusing on an immediate issue, however, we need to keep in mind that academic writing assignments are usually not ends in themselves; they are part of this larger educational process. Thus, if we help a student improve a paper without linking that help to a broader understanding of reader expectations, community conventions, and syntactic patterns, we have subverted the curricular goals of the assignment.

We also need to be careful not to assume that students will naturally make the connection. We may tell a student that we have expectations based on the first sentence of a paragraph that are not met by the second. We may even suggest a change to one or the other sentence. We cannot assume, however, that students will learn from this to ask themselves what a reader, who does not know the master plan for the essay, is thinking as they read in real time. Nor, can we assume that they will realize that readers tend to make predictions based on archetypal organizational patterns. The ability to abstract lessons and principles from particular experiences and to draw connections between experiences is also something that students develop as they progress through their education. We can encourage this process during our one-on-one time by asking them to state explicitly what they have learned that will help them in the future. Encourage them to talk explic-



itly about next time. You may even want to ask them what they would do if they were writing something like this as part of a job.

## 7. Build independence.

The ultimate goal of the one-on-one interaction is to help students move beyond being "students." We encourage them to talk with us about their writing in the first place because we realize that they need help managing the writing process, envisioning their readers, and creating content. In the process of talking through a text, we know that strategies become more honed and deficiencies more apparent. Talking also puts meat on unstated and undeveloped principles and provides opportunities to fill in gaps. But in the end, we want students to be able to do these things by themselves.

We want them to manage the process instead of us. Students should continue to seek input, but we want them to go to their peers and already know what questions they should ask about their writing. When they are writing a paper in graduate school, we want them to realize that a style manual will dictate how to format a particular element and to be able to find that information in the manual. If they hope that their conference proposal will be accepted, we want them to expect that they can find guides about well-written proposals by searching writing center websites on the Internet. Again, we can promote this independence by asking them what they have learned about managing the process and finding answers and what they may try differently in the future. We also can let them know that sooner or later the balance of power will have to shift, and they will have to be the one working one on one.